

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, IT

SUBJECT: STAKES RISE, ISSUES SHARPEN, AS PARTIES TOE MARK
FOR REGIONAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

SUMMARY: JUNE 15 ITALIAN ELECTIONS WILL PROVIDE FIRST COMPREHENSIVE INDICATOR IN THREE YEARS AS TO BASIC POLITICAL TRENDS WITHIN ITALY. ALTHOUGH RESTRICTED TO REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS, ELECTION OUTCOME WILL BE A MAJOR DETERMINANT IN THE RECOMPOSITION OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT WHICH IS LIKELY TO FOLLOW. THIS MESSAGE SKETCHES SOME POSSIBLE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL, OUTLINES MAJOR CAMPAIGN THEMES, AND TOUCHES ON PRESENT BETTING AS TO OUTCOME. END SUMMARY.

1. ON JUNE 15 SOME 40 MILLION ITALIANS WILL GO TO THE POLLS IN REGIONAL AND LOCAL ELECTIONS, WHICH WILL PROVIDE THE FIRST COMPREHENSIVE INDICATIONS SINCE 1972 NATIONAL ELECTIONS OF HOW FAST AND IN WHAT DIRECTIONS THE ITALIAN ELECTORATE IS CHANGING. ALTHOUGH REGIONAL AND LOCAL IN SCOPE, RESULTS WILL BE A MAJOR DETERMINANT IN THE RECOMPOSITION OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT WHICH IS LIKELY TO FOLLOW.

2. THE LITMUS OF CHANGE WILL BE THE PERFORMANCE OF CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY (DC) WHICH ALL OBSERVERS SO FAR EXPECT TO LOSE GROUND TO PARTIES ON ITS LEFT. HOW MUCH THE DC LOSES,
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AND THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE PSI AND/OR THE PCI GAIN, IS THE

CRUCIAL ISSUE. A STRONGER POST-ELECTION PSI WOULD DEMAND A LARGER SHARE OF EXECUTIVE POWER AND PATRONAGE. SUBSTANTIAL PCI GAINS COULD TRIGGER IMPORTANT REALIGNMENTS OF INTERPARTY RELATIONS.

3. MAJOR CAMPAIGN ISSUES ARE ALREADY RATHER WELL-DEFINED. THE BATTLE WILL BE FOUGHT OVER:

- "LAW AND ORDER." CUTS ACROSS THE ENTIRE ELECTORATE, WITH MAJOR IMPACT ON THE MIDDLE CLASS. DEBATE WILL HINGE ON THE NATURE OF THE THREAT TO PUBLIC ORDER AND INSTITUTIONS, WHOSE POLICIES HAVE ALLOWED IT TO FLOURISH, AND HOW BEST TO COMBAT IT.
- "THE ECONOMY." PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS ON POCKETBOOK ISSUES (INFLATION, UNEMPLOYMENT AND UNDER-EMPLOYMENT) MAY NOT REFLECT THE CURRENT CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM OF GOVERNMENT MINISTERS.
- "THE COMMUNIST ISSUE." EMBRACING POSSIBLY ALTERED PCI ROLE VIS-A-VIS GOVERNMENT AT NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS, AND WITH POSSIBLE REPERCUSSIONS OUT OF PORTUGAL.
- "TIME FOR CHANGE." REHEARSAL OF THE LITANY RE FAILURE OF GOVERNMENT TO EFFECT REFORMS IN AREAS PERTAINING TO SOCIAL JUSTICE BROADLY DEFINED. CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS, AS MAJORITY PARTY IN GOVERNMENT, ARE TARGET FOR MUCH OF THE BLAME.

4. DESPITE UNDERLYING STABILITY OF ITALIAN VOTING PATTERNS, A NEW ELEMENT COULD GIVE THE ELECTIONS UNEXPECTED TWISTS. FOR THE FIRST TIME 18-YEAR-OLDS ARE ELIGIBLE TO VOTE. COUNTING THOSE TOO YOUNG TO HAVE VOTED IN THE 1972 ELECTIONS AND THE CURRENT 18-TO-21 YEAR GROUP, UP TO 6 MILLION NEW VOTERS COULD GO TO THE POLLS IN JUNE. SUCH POLLS AS HAVE BEEN ESSAYED SO FAR WOULD ASSIGN A LARGE SHARE OF THE YOUTH VOTE TO PARTIES OF THE LEFT. BUT A LARGE "UNDECIDED" ELEMENT AMONG THE YOUNG, UNKNOWN AS TO WHAT PART OF THE YOUTH WILL TRANSLATE POLITICAL SENTIMENTS INTO ACTUAL VOTES, PLUS QUESTIONABLE TECHNIQUES (AND MOTIVATIONS) IN THE POLLS, MAKES JUDGMENTS HAZARDOUS AT THIS POINT, AND LIKELY UNTIL THE POLLS CLOSE.

5. THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN TO DATE SUGGESTS THAT THE EROSION IN DC STRENGTH CONTINUES TO BE GRADUAL. WHEREAS SOME MONTHS

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AGO MANY, INCLUDING MEMBERS OF THE DC, WERE GLOOMILY PREDICTING DC LOSSES OF FIVE PERCENT OR MORE, THE PARTY'S FORTUNES APPEAR BETTER OF LATE. SECRETARY FANFANI HAS DEFTLY USED THE LAW AND ORDER ISSUE, WITH ITS WIDE ELECTORAL APPEAL, TO THE BENEFIT OF THE DC. THE EVENTS OF PORTUGAL, WITH THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR ITALY, WERE A TIMELY WINDFALL FOR FANFANI, WHICH HE PROMPTLY EXPLOITED TO THE MAXIMUM. THESE, COMBINED WITH THE NON-MATERIALIZATION OF THE ECONOMIC DISASTERS WIDELY PRE-

DICTED LAST WINTER, HAVE SHIFTED PRESENT FORECASTS OF DC LOSSES TO THE TWO OR THREE PERCENT RANGE -- A LOSS WHICH MANY DC LEADERS WOULD CONSIDER "TOLERABLE." VOLPE

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